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Media and youth: The potential influence of television on the behavior of children

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Media and youth: The potential influence of television on the behavior of children

Abstract

Television is, indeed, an extraordinary medium on which almost anything can be revealed or portrayed. It can capture such events as the launching of a space ship or satellite into outer space, or the attempted assassination of a world leader in such a manner as to make the viewer feel likes/he is actually at the site of the event. With all this glory and recognition at its disposal, is it any wonder that television is such a popular medium? Nevertheless, despite its popularity, television can be detrimental to the emotional well-being of certain human beings, the children of our societies.

MEDIA AND YOUTH: THE POTENTIAL INFLUENCE OF TELEVISION
ON THE BEHAVIOR OF CHILDREN

A Research Paper
Presented to
the Department of Curriculum and Instruction
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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The Behavior of Children

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the
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"Whoso loveth instruction loveth knowledge: but he that hateth reproof is brutish (Proverbs: 12:1)."

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Chapter 1

The Introduction

Television is, indeed, an extraordinary medium on which almost anything can be revealed or portrayed. It can capture such events as the launching of a space ship or satellite into outer space, or the attempted assassination of a world leader in such a manner as to make the viewer feel like s/he is actually at the site of the event. With all this glory and recognition at its disposal, is it any wonder that television is such a popular medium? Nevertheless, despite its popularity, television can be detrimental to the emotional well-being of certain human beings, the children of our societies.

Children are very impressionable creatures. They are easily influenced by their home, school and social environments. Together with these stimuli, television also plays an important role in the characterization of our children. Given the aggressive (and) violent materials seen on television today, it is no wonder that a larger than small percentage of the children who watch television today on a regular basis often behave and/or react in a deviant manner when confronted with similar real-life situations.

It is my intention to prove through research that television can have adverse effects on its child viewers, resulting in deviant behavior at some point during the adolescent years. As means of supporting this theory that television can have unfavorable effects on young viewers as true, I will pay strict attention to the premises that the child's confusion between reality and the world as depicted

on television influence the effects of television on adolescents, and that the relationship between children and their lifestyles determine how they might be affected by television.

Statement of the Problem

Through this research, I will attempt to analyze two premises which are believed to be parallel/related to the adverse effects of television on child viewers. These concepts state that -

- (1) confusion between reality and life as dramatized on television influence the effect(s) of television on children, and that
- (2) the relationship between children and their lifestyles, i.e. socio-economic class, family relations, academic achievements, and overall intelligence, also determine how they might be affected by television.

Importance of the Research

This research is important because it focuses on the shortcomings of the popular medium of television in relation to the lifestyles of young viewers.

Assumptions

In compiling and writing this research, several assumptions have

been made:

- (1) It is assumed that children are negatively influenced by television.
- (2) It is assumed that children learn and respond to aggressive behavior more so than to passive behavior.
- (3) It is assumed that children often try to apply learned deviant behavior to real-life situations.

Limitations of the Research

This study is limited to facts based on the findings of authors who have studied, researched, and written on the topics of television and the effects of television on children and adolescents. Although many of the authors' views and findings are several years old, they support my contemporary speculations and should not be dismissed or disregarded as outdated opinions.

Chapter 2

The Review of Literature

It is the opinion of many that television has several effects on children, emotional effects in particular. However, before these effects can be documented as resulting from the child's use of television, it is necessary to examine all of the possible influencing factors which may have some bearing on why children are so affected.

How children view television is one way of determining how children react to what they see. Sally Turner, a master's degree candidate in the area of early childhood education, states that "from ages seven to nine, children respond to the world of fantasy, where they can experience and respond in a safe, non-critical, experimental environment. After age nine, they return to reality, ready to use some of their ideas and their new-found skills in the world of adventure."¹ Children who are able to separate the fictitious events on television from the authentic events which occur in their everyday lives seem better able to cope when faced with similar real-life situations which may have been simulated on television. These children also tend to behave less aggressively in similar real-life situations, despite the fact that the aggressive figure(s) on televised simulations may or may not have gone unpunished for his/her/their aggressive act(s). On the otherhand, children who have not (yet) learned how to distinguish between reality and the world as depicted on television may encounter some emotional problems, and, perhaps, perform deviantly, when faced with real, true-to-life situations which

might be similar to televised simulations of the same predicament(s).

Thus, according to authors Douglas Cater and Stephen Strickland:

"Novel, aggressive behavior sequences are learned by children through exposure to realistic portrayals of aggression on television or in films... The likelihood that such aggressive behaviors will be performed is determined, in part, by the similarity of the setting of the observed violence and cues present in later situations. The actual performance of aggressive behaviors learned from the media is largely contingent on the child's belief in the effectiveness of aggression in attaining his goals while avoiding punishment."²

Children who are confused between reality and the world as depicted on television are also more apt to let television influence how they think roles in real-life situations should be performed. These children are often emotionally scarred and/or greatly disappointed when role models behave differently. In other words, children who identify with and chose to imitate television role models of parents, public officials and occupations, to name a few, are most likely to believe that real-life roles should be carried out this way; thus, children are often confused and/or dissatisfied when these roles are carried out differently.³

Author and instructor W. Andrew Collins, along with graduate students Brian L. Sobol and Sally Westby have found through their studies and research that television does indeed influence how children think that actual roles should be played in real life:

"Television portrayals of social behavior, roles, and attitudes have repeatedly been found to affect the actions and interactions of young viewers, particularly those in the preschool and young grade-school age groups (e.g., Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, and Roberts 1978; Stein and Freidrich 1975). The apparently greater incidence of these effects among younger viewers has recently been attributed (Collins 1975, 1979) partly to younger viewers' relatively poor comprehension of the narratives in which social models are typically portrayed."⁴

Furthermore, Collins, Sobol and Westby believe that interventions that facilitate mature understanding of portrayals, even if they primarily affect comprehension of a few key relationships, potentially moderate the effect of television entertainment programs on children's social expectations and behavior.⁵

The effects which television might have on children also depend greatly on the relationship between the children and their lifestyles. There are at least four factors to consider in determining how children's lifestyles influence their belief(s) in television sequences. Those determining factors, not in any order of precedence are:

- (1) the socio-economic status of the children,
- (2) the correlation between the children and their family and social relations,
- (3) the children's academic achievements, and

(4) the overall intelligence of the children.

One factor in determining how children's lifestyles influence their belief(s) in television is their socio-economic status. In most cases, though not exclusive, it has been found that the social and economic class of the children viewing television determine how the children interpret what they see and hear on television and how the children use their interpretations. Researchers and authors believe that children belonging to middle-class families watch television per day, in terms of actual hours, than do children of a lower socio-economic class. Furthermore, it is believed that they (middle-class children) tend to watch television as a means of escaping from their parents, and to annoy their parents.⁶ But, despite these beliefs, some researchers believe that socio-economic status is not as clear a predictor of violence viewing and aggressive behavior.

The correlation between children and their family and social relations is a second factor to consider in determining how children's lifestyles influence their belief in television sequences. As Newseek reporter Harry F. Waters put it, "...after parents, television has become perhaps the most potent influence on the belief, attitudes, values and behavior of those who are being raised in its all-pervasive glow."⁸ Children with poor interpersonal relationships tend to watch more aggressive footage on television and, as a result of this footage, take on aggressive characteristics. According to authors Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle, and Edwin B. Parker, referring to the research of Lotte Bailyn, personal problems, such as worries over being too fat, having too few

few friends, etcetra, were found to be related to the kind of television content preferred. Thus, a child who has these problems tends to spend more time on the "aggressive hero" type of television content.⁹ On the otherhand, children who have positive relationships with others - family and friends - are less affected by television; hence, Dr. Lawrence Z. Freedman, a noted psychiatrist, tends to believe that children with satisfactory interpersonal relationships "are least likely to be harmed by any experience with television," unlike "psychopathic children" who may use televised aggression "as a model for his own rebellion."¹⁰

Yet another influencing factor to consider in determining how children's lifestyles influence their belief(s) in television simulations is the children's academic achievements. Children's viewing patterns, i.e., when and how they view television and what they view on television, have an affect on how much the children are able to achieve academically. Similarly, children's academic performance(s) also have an affect on how children view television. Many researchers believe that there is a distinct link between high or low academic output, televiewing, and aggressive behavior. Some Wisconsin researchers sum up this correlation by saying:

Adolescents who perform poorly in school watch considerably more violent television, are more likely to approve of aggression, and are generally more likely to behave aggressively.¹¹

Last, but certainly not least, the intelligence of individual children determine how children interpret television. Researchers and authors

tend to believe that children of higher intelligence tend to watch television more realistically and open-mindedly, therefore, being able to distinguish between good, nonaggressive, and bad, aggressive, portrayals of characters.

When children have deficiencies in distinguishing between reality and the world as depicted on television, and they have deficiencies in good interpersonal relationships, they tend to watch more aggressive-based footage on television. Author Turner says, "By the time a youth has reached the age of 14, it is possible that he has witnessed 11,000 television murders. He sees murder and intrigue as methods to solve problems, rather than by discussion, persuasion or logic."¹² At this point, aggression, and possibly other kinds of deviant behavior patterns, can occur as the result of children watching televised aggression. Turner, who believes that one of the most alarming behaviors seen as a result of watching televised aggression is aggression itself, says that we see "children who are combative, as a result of this aggression, whose dramatic play names violent deeds or characters; children who, when asked for a "V" word say 'vampire' for a "B" word say 'bloood (sic),' for a "P" word say 'pow.'"¹³

Some authors note that media violence can have learning and emotional effects on children which could also lead to impulsive aggression:

1. Learning Effects

Novel, aggressive behavior sequences are learned by children through exposure to realistic portrayals of

aggression on television or in films. A large proportion of these behaviors are retained over long periods of time if they are practiced at least once. The likelihood that such aggressive behaviors will be performed is determined, in part, by the similarity of the setting of the observed violence and the cues present in later situations. The actual performance of aggressive behaviors learned from the media is largely contingent on the child's belief in the effectiveness of aggression in attaining his goals while avoiding punishment. The mass media typically present aggression as a highly effective form of behavior.

2. Emotional Effects

Frequent exposure produces an emotional habituation to media violence. There is a suggestive evidence that this results in an increased likelihood of actually engaging in aggression.

3. Impulsive Aggression

Aggressive impulses held in check in the viewer has been made especially aware of the 'wrongness' of aggression or of the suffering that may result from violence..."¹⁴

Cater and Strickland's theories of the emotional effects on young viewers after watching televised aggression is backed by Harry F. Waters'

statement on the issue. According to Waters, "The debate over the link between TV violence and aggressive behavior in society has a longer run than "Gunsmoke." Today, however, even the most chauvinist network apologists concede that some children, under certain conditions, will imitate antisocial acts that they witness on the tube:

Last year (1976) a Los Angeles judge sentenced two teenage boys to long jail terms after they held up a bank and kept 25 persons hostage for seven hours. In pronouncing the sentence, the judge noted disgustedly that the entire scheme had been patterned on an "Adam 12" episode the boys had seen two weeks earlier.¹⁵

These two factors show that televised aggression, when shown to children how are emotionally, mentally or socially instable, can be detrimental to the emotional well-being of said children.

As a final attempt to prove that television influences some of the deviant behavior enacted by children, it is necessary to look at some of the possible ways in which televised aggression actually leads to this behavior. First of all, "for the majority of American children," says Waters, "television has become the principal socializing agent. It shapes their view of what the world is like and what roles they should play in it... Psychologists like Robert Liebert say that the lesson of most TV series is that the rich, the powerful, and the conniving are the most successful."¹⁶ In other words, if children see and, in turn, believe that performing aggressively is the only way to achieve respect, then it is natural to assume that they will react in an aggressive manner

in order to achieve whatever they want.

On the same hand, once the thought that it is all right to respond aggressively is instilled in their minds, children tend to become insensitive to the needs and rights of their families, peers, and others. One psychology professor observes that television "desensitizes" children to violence in real life situations. He believes that after this desensitization, children tend to "tolerate violence in others" because they (children) "have been conditioned to think of it as an everyday thing."¹⁷ In support of this statement, an anonymous reporter for the Des Moines Tribune (Iowa) has this to say:

Children who are "heavy" viewers (watching more than four hours every day) were found to be significantly more fearful and mistrustful than other children.... "Heavy" viewers...were more likely to say it is "almost always" permissible to "hit someone if you are mad at him."¹⁸

Also, some researchers are finding that television may be instilling paranoia in some viewers, and that heavy viewers tend to exaggerate the danger of violence in their own lives - creating a "meanworld syndrome."¹⁹

Chapter 3

Summary & Conclusion

Television can have adverse effects on its child viewers. These effects can result in deviant behaviors, aggression in particular, on the part of the children, at some point during their postadolescent and/or adolescent years. However, before stating these effects, it is necessary to examine the potential influencing stimuli involved in determining how children are affected. These stimuli are (1) the children's ability to distinguish between fiction and reality, (2) the social and economic backgrounds of the children, (3) the relationship between the children and their families and peers, (4) the children's academic achievements, and (5) the children's overall intelligence.

After careful review of the influencing factors involved in determining to what extent children are effected by television, the effects of televised aggression in particular, several conclusions have been made. First of all, children who are able to distinguish between fiction and reality cope better when faced with similar situations, while children who cannot make this distinction occasionally perform aggressively when faced with situations similar to those enacted on television.

Second, it has been found that the social and economic backgrounds of children are not clear predictors of the correlation between violence viewing and aggressive response. However, it has been found that middle-class children watch less television than working-class children, and they watch television for relaxation and as a means of escaping

their parents, whereas working-class children watch television as a source of stimulation and excitement.

A third finding is that parents and peers have little if any effect on how children perceive and respond to televised aggression; however, the kinds of interpersonal relationships that children have can determine how much aggression-based footage children watch and how aggressively children act after viewing such footage. Children with poor interpersonal relationships watch more televised aggression/violence and tend to take on aggressive personality characters more so than children with good interpersonal relationships.

The last finding which is related to the determining factors is that children of higher intelligence watch fewer television, but, when they do watch televised aggression, they are able to do so more open-mindedly and avoid behaving irrationally because of televised aggression.

All in all, the popularity of television increases on a day-to-day basis. With the addition of pay television and video discs, more and more people opt to remain in the privacy of their homes to watch programs, most of which are full of sexual and violent aggression which at one time could only be seen in movie theaters and were restricted to children. Also, the video games which families play together are based on the aggressive actions of the participant(s). As a final note, it is safe to assume that given an emotional/mental deficiency in an area of a child's life plus the added features of television, in the long run, television will probably do more harm to children than good.

Footnotes

- ¹ Sally Turner Barrett. "If They Gave a Murder, Would You Let Your Child Go? TV Violence - Its Effect on Children," Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin 416 (Summer 1980), pp. 15-20.
- ² Douglas Cater and Stephen Strickland. TV Violence and The Child: The Evolution and Fate of the Surgeon General's Report. (New York: Russell Sage Foundations, 1975), p. 29.
- ³ Grant Noble. Children in Front of the Small Screen. (Beverly Hills, California: SAGE Publications, 1975), pp. 111-123.
- ⁴ W. Andrew Collins, Brian L. Sobol, and Sally Westby. "Effects of Adult Commentary of Children's Comprehension and Inferences About A Televised Aggressive Portrayal." Child Development 52 (March 1981), pp. 158-63.
- ⁵ W. Andrew Collins, and Sobol, pp. 158-163.
- ⁶ Noble, p. 66.
- ⁷ Cater and Strickland, p. 53.
- ⁸ Harry F. Waters. "What TV Does to Kids." Newseek, 21 February 1977, pp. 62-70.

⁹ Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle, and Edwin B. Parker. Television in the Lives of Our Children. (Stanford, California: Standord University Press, 1961), p. 119.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 157.

¹¹ Cater and Strickland, p. 53.

¹² Turner, pp. 15-20.

¹³ Turner, pp. 15-20.

¹⁴ Cater and Strickland, pp. 29-30.

¹⁵ Waters, p. 65.

¹⁶ Waters, p. 65.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁸ Ananyous

¹⁹ Waters, p. 68.

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